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Church Giving - in Prosperity and Depression

The total contributions to the Protestant churches of the United States in 1932 were $378,000,000., in round numbers, according to a study made for the conference of the promotional executives of the principal denominations, held in New York under the auspices of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America on September 27.

The figures on the giving to the churches were contained in a research study on trends in church finance, made for the conference by A. C. Marts, president of Marts & Lundy, Inc., a well-known New York firm of financial counsellors.

The contributions to the churches in 1932, as analyzed by Mr. Marts, were approximately forty per cent below those in 1929, as compared with a larger drop of fifty-four per cent in the national income during the same period. The fact that the giving to the churches had declined less than the income of the nation during the depression was interpreted as an exceedingly hopeful sign.

The 1929 contributions to the churches were reported as $581,000,000, falling to $378,000,000 in 1932. The 1929 national income was eighty-five billions; the 1932 national income was set at forty billions.

The advantage which the churches have enjoyed in suffering a smaller decline than the national income was, however, set over against the fact of the small amount of the churches' share at any time. The total share of the churches in the national income during any of the years for which Mr. Marts had gathered data was not quite one per cent. Moreover, the churches did not share at all in the special growth of national income during the "boom" years 1927 to 1929. On the contrary, the income of the churches actually declined about three per cent during those years.

Expenditures for recreation in the United States, on the other hand, during 1927 to 1929 greatly increased. Since 1929 the expenditures for recreation have equally rapidly declined, the drop being sixty-five per cent.

Commenting on the significance of the figures presented by Mr. Marts, Dr. Samuel McCrea Cavert, General Secretary of the Federal Council, said:

"It is highly significant that in the so-called 'era of prosperity,' when the national income was shooting upward to its highest peak, none of the increased resources flowed into the channels of Christian service. The people had more money but apparently the surplus was spent for personal indulgence and the satisfaction of material wants. But when the period of the depression came the people stood by the Church with noteworthy loyalty. Hard-pressed though they were, they did not - in the aggregate, - curtail their gifts to the Church as much as their income had been curtailed. This is most heartening evidence of the hold that the Church still has on the hearts of the people."